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Is Wittgenstein a Contextualist?

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Abstract

There is definitely a family resemblance between what contemporary contextualism maintains in philosophy of language and some of the claims about meaning put forward by the later Wittgenstein. Yet the main contextualist thesis, namely that linguistic meaning undermines truth-conditions, was not defended by Wittgenstein. If a claim in this regard can be retrieved in Wittgenstein despite his manifest antitheoretical attitude, it is instead that truth-conditions trivially supervene on linguistic meaning. There is, however, another Wittgensteinian claim that truly has a contextualist flavour, namely that linguistic meaning is itself wide-contextual. To be sure, this claim does not lead to the eliminativist/intentionalist conception of linguistic meaning that radical contextualists have recently developed. Rather, it goes together with a robust conception of linguistic meaning as intrinsically normative. Yet it may explain why Wittgenstein is taken to be a forerunner of contemporary contextualism.

Introduction

There is definitely a family resemblance between what contemporary contextualism maintains in philosophy of language and some of the claims about meaning put forward by the later Wittgenstein. Yet the main contextualist thesis, namely that linguistic meaning undermines truth-conditions, was not defended by Wittgenstein. If a claim in this regard can be retrieved in Wittgenstein despite his manifest antitheoretical attitude, it is instead that truth-conditions trivially supervene on linguistic meaning. There is, however, another Wittgensteinian claim that truly has a contextualist flavour, namely that linguistic meaning is itself wide contextual. To be sure, this claim does not lead to the eliminativist/intentionalist conception of linguistic meaning that radical contextualists have recently developed. Rather, it goes together with a robust conception of linguistic meaning as intrinsically normative. Yet it may explain why Wittgenstein is taken to be a forerunner of contemporary contextualism.

Wittgenstein and Truth-conditional Contextualism

It has often been said that Wittgenstein's later reflections on meaning are among the philosophical sources of contemporary contextualism in philosophy of language. Take the so-called *Pragmatic View* (PV), which represents the manifesto of a standard contextualist position in philosophy of language, shared in fact by most philosophers that are commonly labelled as contextualists.¹ PV results from the combination of the following two sub-theses: i) linguistic meaning undermines truth-conditions, for a sentence may be assigned different truth-conditions depending on the context in which it is uttered, and ii) this truth-conditionally relevant context is a *wide* context, that is, it is not a set-theoretical entity whose members are given by some limited parameters (agent, space, time, etc), a *narrow* context, but rather a concrete situation of language use including whatever is relevant for meaning determination.² It is now common to consider Wittgenstein as one of the forerunners of this view.³

Granted, PV echoes ideas that sound Wittgensteinian, at least because one of his most famous disciples, Waismann, originally defended the thesis according to which natural language is essentially *open-textured*. As a matter of fact, PV can well be seen as encompassing this thesis.⁴ Yet here one must be very careful. Sub-thesis ii) may well be seen as belonging to a Wittgensteinian heritage. For the later Wittgenstein meaning, as arising out of language-games, is embedded in a great number of extralinguistic activities, whose clustering amounts to a form of life: "The word "language-game" is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (2009⁴, § 23).⁵ Yet there is no evidence that Wittgenstein also supported PV's claim i) that linguistic meaning undermines truth-conditions. Instead, in Wittgenstein one finds evidence to the contrary.

Before proceeding, let me just stress a methodological point. We are often told that the later Wittgenstein had an antitheoretical attitude towards philosophical matters. In point of fact, he explicitly rejected the idea that his purpose was to put forward philosophical theses. Insofar as philosophical theses are mere platitudes that have to be critically scrutinised rather than naively put forward, attempting the latter would be *per se* pointless – as he says, "If someone were to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them" (2009⁴, § 128). His aim, in contrast, is simply to describe the grammar, that is the rules of use, of the ordinary language expressions which give rise to philosophical perplexities (2009⁴, § 124). But what Wittgenstein says in this respect must not be taken too literally. Elucidating the grammar of our expressions is more a theoretical activity of understanding than a mere description of how language functions. Wittgenstein himself says this in the very same context in an implicit reference to Freud, of whom he explicitly declared himself to be a follower:⁶

A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words. Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*. (2009⁴, § 122)

Thus, it is quite possible to ascribe to the later Wittgenstein conceptions about various philosophical issues. Such conceptions are couched in the form of a reconstruction of the grammar of the corresponding expressions in language. In this respect, there is not much difference between Wittgenstein's philosophical method and Strawson's descriptive metaphysics, as Peter Hacker has noticed:

Strawson's very general 'metaphysical' claims, if correct, are, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, very general descriptions of the 'grammatical' connections between expressions or types of expressions within our language [...]. For 'descriptive metaphysics' is an investigation into the conceptual articulations and roles of general categories of expression. (1996, 176-7)

A view that Wittgenstein would have definitely espoused by attributing to grammar a metaphysical task: "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is." (2009⁴, § 373).

This said, let me return to my main line of argument. According to i) above, the linguistic meaning of the expressions figuring in a certain sentence is unable to fix the conditions under which a particular token of that sentence is true. For instance, sentences like:

- (1) Paul opens the door
- (2) Peter cuts the grass.

are such that no token of them can be given truth-conditions on the mere basis of the meaning the conventions of language assign to their respective constituent expressions, hence to those sentences as a whole. In order to have truth-conditions, those sentences have to be uttered in particular contexts. As we know from sub-thesis ii), these contexts are *wide* contexts, concrete situations of use for the sentences in question. When sentences are merely assigned a *narrow* context, then (at least in many cases – see below) linguistic meaning still manages to determine truth-conditions for them, by automatically identifying in a certain narrow context the parameter relevant for contextually attributing truth-conditions to the sentence. Take Bjork's utterance of:

- (3) I am an Icelandic.

Given the linguistic meaning of “I”, which is (roughly) *the agent in context*, once a certain narrow context is selected in which Bjork is the agent, that linguistic meaning automatically identifies that agent parameter as the contextual referent of “I” so that the above token of (3) is true in that narrow context iff Bjork, i.e. the agent in that context, is an Icelandic.⁷

Depending on which wide context a sentence is uttered in, moreover, that sentence will have different truth-conditions. Take (1). If it is uttered in a wide context in which Paul puts a key into the door lock, (1) will be true in that context iff Paul opens the door with the key; if it is uttered in a wide context in which Paul breaks the door with a kick, (1) will be true in that context iff Paul opens the door with that kick. Analogously with (2). If it is uttered in a wide context in which Peter is using a lawnmower, (2) will be true in that context iff Peter mows the lawn; if it is uttered in another wide context in which Peter digs the ground with a knife, (2) will be true in that context iff Peter cuts into the ground with the knife.

Now, it is not my task here to assess whether this contextualist claim is correct.⁸ As I hinted at before, my aim is rather to say not only that there is no evidence that the later Wittgenstein defended this claim, but also that he defended a quite opposite claim.

To begin with, as far as truth is concerned, Wittgenstein seems to endorse a deflationist, if not a redundantist, position, according to which not only the meaning of the predicate “true” is exhausted by its figuring on the left-hand side of biconditionals instantiating the disquotational schema “p’ is true iff p”, but also that predicate itself is eliminated through such biconditionals (2009⁴, § 124). This fits nicely with his having a deflationist view of truth-conditions. In such a view, for any sentence for which it is grammatically correct to ask whether it is true – that is, for any sentence which is embedded in an *assertive* language-game – trivially saying that that sentence is true iff certain conditions obtain is nothing more than expressing a rule for the use of that sentence in an assertive language-game (1969, §112). Moreover, for Wittgenstein such a deflationist conception of truth-conditions is based on a conception of reference which is deflationist as well. Firstly, in order for a simple sentence to be true, what its singular term refers to must belong to what its predicate refers to (2009⁴, §444). Secondly, it is a trivial fact that any sort of subsentential expression refers to something. But lastly – and this is the main point – this fact is trivial also because it does not reveal anything substantial about meaning, for saying that any subsentential term refers to something does not say anything about *how* such a term is used. Saying that any such word refers to something is not wrong; simply, it does not elucidate anything about meaning insofar as it does not say how that word is used, hence how that word designate. This is why the referentialist theory of meaning that he himself defended in terms of what at the time of the *Tractatus* he called “names”, according to which to signify is nothing other than to designate something, is fundamentally

mistaken. The last two points are clearly stated at the very beginning of the *Investigations*, where “to signify” [*bezeichnen*] is clearly used to mean “to designate”:

Now what do the words of this language *signify*? – How is what they signify supposed to come out other than in the kind of use they have? [...]

Well, one can abbreviate the description of the use of the word “slab” by saying that this word signifies this object. This will be done if, for example, it is merely a matter of removing the misunderstanding that the word “slab” refers to the building stone that we in fact call “block” – but the kind of ‘*referring*’ this is, that is to say, the rest of the use of these words, is already known.

Equally one may say that the signs “a”, “b”, etc. *signify* [my italics] numbers: when, for example, this removes the misunderstanding that “a”, “b”, “c” play the part actually played in the language by “block”, “slab”, “pillar”. And one may also say that “c” *signifies* [my italics] this number and not that one; if, for example, this serves to explain that the letters are to be used in the order a, b, c, d, etc., and not in the order a, b, d, c.

But making the descriptions of the uses of these words similar in this way cannot make the uses themselves any more like one another! For, as we see, they are absolutely unlike. (2009⁴, §10).

If we say, “Every word in the language signifies something”, we have so far said nothing *whatever*; unless we explain exactly *what* distinction we wish to make. (It might be, of course, that we wanted to distinguish the words of language (8) from words ‘without meaning’ such as occur in Lewis Carroll’s poems, or words like “Tra-la-la” in a song.) (2009⁴, §13)

He repeats this point later in the *Investigations* with respect to sensation words, where he simply extends to this particular semantic field the general consideration he put forward previously:

How do words *refer* to sensations? – There doesn’t seem to be any problem here; don’t we talk about sensations every day, and name them? (2009⁴, §244)

For Wittgenstein, therefore, in order to determine what counts semantically as far as an expression is concerned, we have to focus on its way of being *used*, its *grammar* in his jargon, which yields what other people would call its linguistic meaning. Once this way

for an expression to be used is given, it is also given not only, and trivially, that such an expression refers to something, but also, and interestingly, what it is for that expression to refer to something.

From this way of putting things, therefore, it turns out that for Wittgenstein it is not the case that (sentential) linguistic meaning undermines truth-conditions; on the contrary, those truth-conditions trivially supervene on (sentential) linguistic meaning. Since, on the one hand, the use of subsentential terms not only explains what it means for such terms to refer to something, but also constitutes the linguistic meaning of the sentences containing them and, on the other hand, such a reference determines the truth-conditions of those sentences, it turns out that once a sentence's linguistic meaning is given, its truth-conditions are also given. In this perspective, two sentences differing in their linguistic meaning will also *ipso facto* differ in their truth-conditions; put alternatively, change the linguistic meaning of a sentence and you will *eo ipso* change its truth-conditions.

At first sight, this may seem a minimal difference between the contextualist position and the Wittgensteinian position on meaning. A more careful scrutiny, however, reveals that this difference is very substantial.

For contextualists, as far as meaning is concerned the focus is on the truth-conditions of sentential tokens. These truth-conditions are underdetermined by linguistic meaning. In a contextualist light, as I said above, wide context is the relevant element for truth-conditional determination. This may happen in two ways. Either, first of all, wide context determines the application-conditions the tokens of some subsentential elements possess – in the simplest case, such application-conditions are the referents of such tokens – and second, the sentential token constituted by those tokens has its truth-conditions compositionally, i.e. on the basis of those application-conditions. Or, wide context directly determines the truth-conditions of that sentential token, so that the subsentential elements of that token obtain their application-conditions derivatively.

Although the second proposal is closer to the spirit of contextualism, the first is more theoretically viable. For it allows us to keep the truth-conditions of a sentential token dependent on the application-conditions of its subsentential token components (hence ultimately, on their reference).⁹ Yet no matter which proposal is chosen, once wide context is given a truth-conditional role it turns out that linguistic meaning is unable (both *per se* or together with the intervention of the narrow context it commands) to determine those truth-conditions.

For Wittgenstein, on the contrary, it is entirely the reverse: the focus is on the linguistic meaning of a sentence, as determined by the linguistic meaning of its constituent expressions, while the sentence's truth-conditions are an uninteresting appendix. As stated above, in the later phase of his philosophy, the key notion for understanding

meaning is not *truth* – there is nothing more about truth than what is given by all instances of the disquotational schema “‘p’ is true iff p”. It is rather *use*, or better *correct use*, as we will see immediately below.

Wittgenstein and Meaning Contextualism

In comparing Wittgenstein and contextualism, we have hitherto had only negative results. Unlike contemporary contextualists, Wittgenstein thinks that the linguistic meaning of the elements composing a sentence determines that sentence’s linguistic meaning, which in its turn determines, albeit trivially, that sentence’s truth-conditions.

Does this mean that Wittgenstein was not a contextualist at all? This would be too severe a conclusion. There is undoubtedly a contextualist flavour in the later Wittgenstein’s reflections on meaning. This concerns the very notion of linguistic meaning. Let us see how.

As is well-known, one of the turning points in the later Wittgenstein’s reflections on meaning hinges on his so-called rule-paradox. It is common knowledge that when we formulate it with respect to the meaning of an expression, the paradox consists in the following question: how can it be the case that an utterly new application of a rule regarding a certain expression, namely an application of the expression in an utterly new circumstance, is correct or incorrect given that no-one has hitherto thus applied the expression? As Wittgenstein himself says, in such a circumstance:

How can the word “Slab” indicate what I have to do, when after all I can bring any action into accord with any interpretation? (1978, VI § 38)

In Wittgenstein’s view, the paradox serves to dispel a great number of conceptions about meaning that futilely attempt to solve the paradox by giving a positive answer to the above question. These conceptions are inevitably misleading as they are generated by a conceptual muddle: the idea that meaning has to do with interpretation.

For example, one of the most popular conceptions of meaning – the one claiming that the meaning of an expression consists in having a particular experience or some mental state accompanying the use of that expression – holds that the paradox can be solved by saying that the correct application of a word in a new circumstance of use consists in previously *thinking* that very application, by thus interpreting what the relevant rule says with respect to that circumstance.

However, once one looks at meaning in the right way by filtering out that muddle, the paradox simply *dissolves*. There is no way of solving the paradox; one can only dissolve it. For “being a correct application of the rule regarding an expression in a circumstance” means being the application of the rule regarding that expression in that circumstance that conforms to the paradigmatic application of that rule in that circumstance. That paradigmatic application is the criterion of correctness for further

applications of that rule in that circumstance: the correct applications are those matching the paradigmatic application, the incorrect ones those failing to matching it. Typically, an application becomes paradigmatic insofar as, in originally applying the rule in that circumstance, people converge in effecting exactly that application. Now, since in the circumstance the paradox describes there is no paradigmatic application of the rule regarding that expression (as yet), there is consequently no room for either correctness or incorrectness. Only when an application of the rule regarding that expression in that circumstance has become the paradigmatic application of the rule regarding that expression in that circumstance, can there be subsequent correct vs. incorrect applications of the rule regarding that expression in that circumstance, namely those matching vs. those not matching the paradigmatic application. In Wittgenstein's famous example, once it has become paradigmatic to write "1002" when one applies the expression "+ 2" in a *particular numerical circumstance*, that is the occurrence of "1000" in an arithmetical series, writing "1002" rather than any other numeral is the correct application of the rule "add 2" with respect to that expression in *that circumstance*.¹⁰

As we have seen implicitly, Wittgenstein's dissolution of the rule-following paradox comes from his particular conception of what linguistic meaning consists in. Not only does the linguistic meaning of an expression coincide for him with the *norm* for the correct use of that expression, but that norm (as any norm in general) also stands in an *internal*, conceptual, relation with its paradigmatic application(s) for that expression in (a) *given circumstance(s) of use*. First of all, the paradigmatic application of the rule regarding an expression in a given circumstance of use does in fact sanction what is the correct vs. the incorrect application of the rule regarding that expression *in that given circumstance*. Moreover, the rule is constituted by its paradigmatic applications in the various circumstances of its use; as far as any rule is concerned, there is nothing over and above such applications.¹¹

This way of putting the question has the following consequence. Insofar as in a new circumstance no application of a rule regarding a certain expression has been already established as the paradigmatic application of that rule in that circumstance, there is no correct vs. incorrect application of that rule in that circumstance. Only the establishment of a paradigmatic application can determine this. Since, as we have just seen, that rule is constituted by its paradigmatic applications, this establishment amounts to an *extension* of the (rule that constitutes the) meaning of the expression. In Wittgenstein's own example, suppose one establishes the paradigm for the expression "analogous" when it is applied, rather than in ordinary cases, to the construction of heptacaidecagons with respect to the construction of simpler geometrical figures. Then one can determine which is the correct application of that word in this new circumstance of use and therefore have "a new way of using 'analogous'" (1976, 64).

This already shows that linguistic meaning is contextual for Wittgenstein. Depending on different circumstances of use, the meaning of an expression varies, as he explicitly recognises by comparing the issue of meaning identity of certain

arithmetical pieces of behaviour with the meaning identity of different uses of an indexical, hence prototypically contextual, expression:

Suppose someone continues the sequence 1, 3, 5, 7, . . . in expanding the series $2x - 1$. And now he asks himself, “But am I always doing the same thing, or something different every time?”

If, from one day to the next, someone promises: “Tomorrow I’ll come to see you”– is he saying the same thing every day, or every day something different? (2009⁴, §226)

Note moreover that when he speaks here of “circumstances of use”, Wittgenstein is talking of *wide* context, of concrete situations of use. From a theoretical perspective, there is no problem in stretching a narrow context by adding a ‘language’- parameter to it and then saying that the linguistic meaning of a sentence is linked to that expanded narrow context. There may well be a good reason as to why one has to perform such an expansion. Putting the language which is used in a narrow context automatically fixes the linguistic meaning that a certain sentence possesses (hence also its truth-conditions). Cross-linguistic puns, for instance, may be understood this way. Consider the sentence:

(4) I vitelli dei romani sono belli.

If an expanded narrow context has Italian in its ‘language’- parameter, then (4) means that *Roman calves are fine*. But if that context has Latin in such a parameter, then (4) means *Go, Vitellius, to the sound of war of the Roman god*.¹²

Yet in thinking of meaning expansion, Wittgenstein does not have in mind such narrow context expansion. Rather, as I said above, concrete situations of use, namely wide contexts, are relevant for him in order to single out linguistic meaning as well. Thus, although as we saw before there is no reason to consider Wittgenstein a contextualist as to *truth-conditions*, he definitely is a contextualist in respect of *linguistic meaning*. In other words, it is for him a matter of wide context what linguistic meaning an expression possesses. To put it in Perry’s (1997) terms, wide context is appealed to by Wittgenstein in a *pre-semantic role* – to determine linguistic meaning – rather than in a *semantic role* – to determine truth-conditions, as contemporary contextualists do.

This comparison with contextualism can be pushed a bit further. For Wittgenstein, not only are circumstances of use relevant to meaning determination, but which circumstances are thus relevant is contextual: a *meta-contextuality* is at stake. That is, in order for something to count as a *new* circumstance of application of an expression that has to fix another paradigmatic way for that expression to be correctly used, an appeal to *context itself* is relevant. The circumstance must indeed be sufficiently extraordinary.

As Wittgenstein himself explains, take a case in which something we direct our attention towards suddenly disappears and then reappears to our sight, again and again. Would it be correct or incorrect to apply to that thing the word “chair”? As he says, neither response is adequate, for in such an extraordinary circumstance no application of the word has already become paradigmatic. This does not mean that the word “chair” has no meaning, but simply that its meaning has not been hitherto stretched in order to cover also the application of that word in that circumstance:

I say, “There is a chair over there”. What if I go to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight? — “So it wasn’t a chair, but some kind of illusion.” — But a few seconds later, we see it again and are able to touch it, and so on. — “So the chair was there after all, and its disappearance was some kind of illusion.” — But suppose that after a time it disappears again or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules ready for such cases a rules saying whether such a thing is still to be called a “chair”? But do we miss them when we use the word “chair”? And are we to say that we do not really attach any meaning to this word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of it? (2009⁴, 80; see also §§ 68, 79, 83)

Now, appealing to the extraordinariness of a circumstance is again to appeal to a *wide-contextual* factor: something is extraordinary for someone endowed with certain cognitions and intentions, but not for someone else. As we are here speaking of a second-order contextuality, we find that on the level of linguistic meaning Wittgenstein is a *meta-contextualist* as many contemporary contextualists are at the level of truth-conditions. Regarding, for example, (2): for such contextualists, which truth-conditions obtain is not only wide-contextual, that is whether it is true in a wide context iff Peter mows a lawn or it is true in another wide context iff Peter cuts into the ground; it is also wide-contextual which wide context is relevant to ascribing truth-conditions to that sentence. It is not enough that, in order to get the second truth-conditions, (2) is uttered, say, having a playing field rather than a private garden in mind; rather, it is for instance the fact that one is already speaking of what happens after a football match that selects the second instead of the first wide context, hence the second instead of the first interpretation.¹³

Meaning Eliminativism vs. Meaning Normativism

At this point, it is important to mention a caveat. Making Wittgenstein a contextualist on linguistic meaning does not mean he embraced what is nowadays called *radical contextualism*, which entertains a conception of linguistic meaning that superficially resembles Wittgenstein’s conception. Let me illustrate this point in detail.

While all contemporary contextualists believe that linguistic meaning undermines truth-conditions, in the contextualist field one can draw a further distinction between those who hold that there is a residual linguistic meaning – *moderate* contextualists – and those who hold that linguistic meaning has to be substantially eliminated – *radical* contextualists.¹⁴

On the one hand, moderate contextualists say that the application-conditions of subsentential tokens (or straightforwardly the truth-conditions of the sentential token in which those tokens occur) are conjointly determined by both wide context and the linguistic meaning of the relevant expressions. For Kaplan (1989a and b), demonstratives are impure indexicals in the sense that narrow context does not fix their contextual reference given their linguistic meaning; something more, an element of wide context (gestures, background intentions, etc), is required. Hence, demonstratives are for moderate contextualists the paradigmatic case of the situation they envisage. Take a token of the following sentence:

(5) John loves that.¹⁵

Selecting a certain narrow context does not help to determine which among all the possible legitimate candidates is the referent of the above token of “that”. Depending on the speaker’s referential intentions and/or the salience relations among objects in the speaker’s surroundings, plus any other wide-context relevant factor, the reference of the above token of “that” is determined – say, the book over there; hence, that token of (5) is true in a certain wide context iff John loves the book over there. Yet whatever the referent is that these wide-context factors determine, this referent must be constrained by the linguistic meaning of that demonstrative, that is by the Kaplanian (1989a and b) character of “that”, roughly *the contextual individual at a certain distance from the contextual agent*. This means that if the speaker intended to refer, for instance, to himself by means of the above token of “that”, he would not be the contextual referent of that token, for the linguistic meaning of “that” prevents that demonstrative from referring to the speaker.¹⁶

On the other hand, radical contextualists deny that linguistic meaning has even this co-determining role with respect to truth-conditions. According to them there is, properly speaking, no such a thing as linguistic meaning either. Expressions have at most contextualised senses that, so to say, supervene on postulated identities between their past and their future uses; these identities are grounded on intended similarities between their past and their future situations of application. In more detail, firstly, to use an expression is to employ it as having in certain wide contexts, *target-situations*, application-conditions which are similar to the application-conditions it has in other wide contexts, *source-situations*, namely the situations in which one has learned to use it. Secondly, the parameters that allow such situations to be similar are also wide-contextual, possibly depending on the speaker’s intentions.¹⁷ Again, examples are

useful to clarify this position. Suppose one learns how to use “white” by applying that word in source-situations while uttering the following tokens of:

- (6) Polar bears are white
- (7) Snow is white.

Now, in such source-situations “white” has application-conditions similar to those it has in other situations, target-situations, while one utters the following tokens of:

- (8) The car is white
- (9) The house is white.

Yet the similarity obtaining between the application-conditions of “white” in (6)-(7) and its application-conditions in (8)-(9) is in turn a contextual, intended, similarity whose relevant parameter concerns the surface colour of a substance. If the intended similarity concerned the inside colour of a substance, the application-conditions of “white” in (6)-(7) would instead be regarded as similar to those mobilised by the following tokens of:

- (10) Coconuts are white
- (11) Milk is white.

Certainly, insofar as contextualists acknowledge that linguistic meaning does not by itself determine sentential truth-conditions, which stance they take towards linguistic meaning is inessential for them to be a contextualist, whether moderate or radical. Yet it should be clear that the more contextualists are radical, the less Wittgensteinian they are.

Apparently, eliminativism towards linguistic meaning suits Wittgensteinian habits. In his later phase, Wittgenstein himself denounced any attempt at reifying meaning, at holding that there is such a *thing* as meaning.¹⁸ But we should not let this superficial similarity lead us astray. Firstly, Wittgenstein simply denies that the fact that an expression has a meaning must be understood in *relational* rather in *monadic* terms. So, Wittgenstein is not an eliminativist towards meaning but simply a non-reificationist.¹⁹ Secondly, for him to account for what it is for an expression to have meaning has to be done in *normative* terms; that is, it amounts to that expression being *correctly* used. In this respect, Wittgenstein has a *robust* conception of the meaning of an expression: such a meaning consists in a criterion of *correctness* for individual applications of an expression. Thirdly, Wittgenstein develops this conception by advancing his dissolution of the rule-following paradox following on from his rejection of the purported solutions to it. Curiously enough, one of these same purported solutions articulates the eliminativist conception of linguistic meaning that radical contextualists endorse.

As I mentioned above, the paradox consists in the following question: how can it be the case that an utterly new application of a rule regarding a certain expression, that is an application of the expression in an utterly new circumstance, is correct or incorrect given that no-one has hitherto thus applied the expression?

Now, as I hinted at before, a mentalist approach to rules would propose the following solution to the paradox: such an application is correct insofar as whoever applies it *intends* that this application is an application of the same kind as the previous applications of the same expression. For instance, if I apply “face” to some rock on Mars, that application is correct only insofar as I intend that that application is relevantly similar, for instance under the ‘shape’- parameter, to the applications of that word previously made on Earth. It therefore turns out that the mentalist solution to the rule-paradox is strikingly analogous to what radical contextualists propose for linguistic meaning: a certain utterly new application of the expression is correct only insofar as it is *intended* to be similar, under a certain respect, to a previous application of that expression; yet if another parameter of similarity between word uses were mentally chosen, that new application would be incorrect.

However, as Wittgenstein sees it, this purported intentionalist solution is bound to fail. For it shares with any other purported solution to his paradox a serious conceptual drawback; namely, the idea that correctly using an expression amounts to suitably *interpreting* that expression, typically by means of the appropriate mental act. Yet no interpretation fares any better, for it leaves the interpreter precisely where they were at the very beginning. An interpretation is just another sign which is imposed on the very sign it was supposed to interpret:

in this chain of reasoning we place one interpretation behind another, as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another lying behind it. (2009⁴, §201)

[But] every interpretation hangs in the air together with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning. (2009⁴, §198)

one should speak of interpretation only when one expression of a rule is substituted for another. (2009⁴, §201)

According to Wittgenstein, the way out of the paradox consists not in solving it, but in dissolving it as a pseudo-problem once we grasp what it really means for an application of an expression to be correct: to repeat, to apply the expression in a given circumstance of use in conformity with its paradigmatic application in that circumstance. Thus, despite superficial similarities, radical contextualism and the Wittgensteinian stance towards linguistic meaning diverge sharply from one other.

Towards an Evaluation

Let us now take stock. I claimed that although Wittgenstein is not a contextualist on truth-conditions, he is a contextualist on linguistic meaning, provided that his contextualism is not intended along contemporary lines such as those developed particularly by radical contextualists.

Nevertheless, at this point a doubt arises. Is the fact that Wittgenstein has been taken to be a forerunner of *truth-conditional* contextualism due just to some historical distortion – most likely, Wittgenstein has simply been collapsed onto Waismann – or are there still elements in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language that justify this attribution? I will therefore conclude this paper by showing that there is room for a positive answer to this question, even though such an attribution remains a distortion of Wittgenstein’s overall view on meaning.

Once Wittgenstein’s contextualism has been fleshed out as above, it is easy to understand why he has been appealed to as a forerunner of contemporary contextualism on truth-conditions. An obvious consequence of contextualism on truth-conditions is that, if there is no adequate wide context that can yield truth-conditions for a token of a certain sentence, that token simply lacks truth-conditions. Suppose, to adapt an example from Waismann (1945[1951]),²⁰ that the sentence:

(12) I am a man

is uttered by a one-hundred-meter-tall giant. In this admittedly unusual situation, the relevant token of (12) seems not to have conditions under which it is true. However, it is clear that the context which is mobilised in order for the token of the above sentence not to have truth-conditions is a wide context, a concrete situation of language use, and not a narrow context, a set of a limited number of parameters. For in the case of the above token of (12), although the narrow context which is associated with that sentence allows the pure indexical “I” to have a referent – the giant – it does not suffice for the sentence in that context to have truth-conditions. In point of fact, the reason as to why (12) has no contextual truth-conditions is that in the wide context in which it is uttered, the word “man” fails to have application-conditions – the giant neither comes nor fails to come under the concept, namely for Wittgenstein the linguistic meaning which has been hitherto expressed by that word.

Now, Wittgenstein would well acknowledge that the above token of (12) fails to have determinate truth-conditions. Thus, he has been ranked among the forerunners of contemporary truth-conditional contextualism in virtue of this acknowledgement. Yet, I must also add that he would account for this failure in an utterly different way from contemporary truth-conditional contextualists. For him, in the given – admittedly strange – situation of use, the word “man” has not been given a paradigmatic

application. As the linguistic meaning that word has hitherto received does not normatively command the situation in question, in that situation it is as if that word had no linguistic meaning at all; its meaning has not yet been suitably extended in order to cover that situation. As we have seen above, in his view truth-conditions trivially supervene on linguistic meaning. Therefore, if under such a condition for the sentence thus tokened there is no linguistic meaning, that sentential token has no truth-conditions either! He clearly says this with respect to another case by making a point which has been taken up – as we have just seen, erroneously – by contemporary truth-conditional contextualists as evidence for their own position:²¹

It is as if I were to say, “You surely know what ‘It’s 5 o’clock here’ means; so you also know what ‘It’s 5 o’clock on the sun’ means. It means simply that it is just the same time there as it is here when it is 5 o’clock.” – The explanation by means of *sameness* does not work here. For I know well enough that one can call 5 o’clock here and 5 o’clock there “the same time”, but do not know in what cases one is to speak of its being the same time here and there. (2009⁴:§350).

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¹ To cite just a few, cf. Recanati (1993, 2004), Searle (1979, 1980, 1983), Travis (1981, 1989, 2000).

² For this formulation, cf. Bianchi (2004:247).

³ Cf. Bianchi (2004), Recanati (2004), Travis (1989).

⁴ Cf. Waismann (1945[1951]) and again Bianchi (2004).

⁵ See also (2009⁴, §§ 199, 206, 217).

⁶ As Rush Rhees reported in (1966:41).

⁷ For this way of putting things, cf. Predelli (2005).

⁸ I have tried to give some support to it in my Author (2009).

⁹ Travis (1981, 2000) leans towards the second proposal. For the first proposal, see Recanati (1993, 2004). According to Recanati, one can speak of a *pragmatic* compositionality acting on application-conditions wide-contextually determined by means of *local* primary pragmatic processes, that is processes that operate at a subsentential level.

¹⁰ For this way of dealing with the rule-following paradox, see Wittgenstein (2009⁴, §§ 201, 204), (1978, VI§16). I owe this interpretation of Wittgenstein's manoeuvring with the paradox to Frascolla (1994) and have defended it several times elsewhere, e.g. in Author (2001).

¹¹ Cf. Baker-Hacker (1984:297-8); and again my Author (2001).

¹² For other reasons as to why one has to perform such an operation, see Recanati (2000).

¹³ On meta-contextualism about truth-conditions, see Bianchi (2001, chap.11).

¹⁴ For this difference between moderate and radical contextualism, see Recanati (2004).

¹⁵ This example traces back to Kaplan (1979, 396).

¹⁶ This case is a variant of an example in Kaplan (1989a, 490), where an individual fails to refer to the flower she sees mistaking it for a man and consequently addressing it as “he”.

¹⁷ Cf. Recanati (2004).

¹⁸ Cf. for example (1958, 1,5).

¹⁹ In this respect, rather than to what meaning is for eliminativists, Wittgenstein is closer to Sellars’ approach to meaning as the conceptual role of an expression. See, for instance, Sellars (1972).

²⁰ Already presented by Bianchi (2004, 238).

²¹ In Searle (1980), the example concerns the failure of satisfaction-conditions for the order “Cut the sun!”.